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Richard Wagner in the “Cult of Art” of Nazi Germany

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In his book on aesthetics and Nazi politics, translated in 2004 as *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, Eric Michaud, Director of Studies at the *École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales* in Paris, wrote that National Socialist attention to the arts was intended “to present the broken [German] Volk with an image of its ‘eternal *Geist*’ and to hold up to it a mirror capable of restoring to it the strength to love itself.”¹ I came upon this, among other ideas of Michaud, when preparing the conceptual framework for my own book, *Inhumanities: Nazi Interpretations of Western Culture*, just released by Cambridge University Press. Considering his book last year, I found a number of Michaud’s concepts very intriguing, but only made general references to them in my Introduction and Conclusion. The gist of these ideas will be familiar to readers of George Mosse, whom Michaud should have cited more vigorously. However, I found that Michaud put some of the key concepts of the History of Nazi Culture more strongly than I have read elsewhere, and also that they seemed to resonate with much of the material I uncovered in my research.

Above all, Michaud insisted that Nazi cultural politics was not just a matter of “propagandizing” the party platform in cultural terms. Instead, he insisted that it was a central component of the National Socialist world view, with an active, not merely reflective, role in the life and actions of the Nazi party and regime. As Michaud put it, we cannot “account for this phenomenon by simply resorting to the term propaganda” and assuming that Nazism was just “making art serve its political ends.”² To see what Mosse termed “Nazi culture” as mere propaganda is an underestimation of its seminal function in the workings of National Socialism. In Michaud’s words, again, through Nazi representations of Cultural History— “the *Geist*, the internal or spiritual Reich, was phenomenalized . . . Hitler was convinced that German art contained the power that . . . could save the sick Germans. In answer to party militants who [questioned] the need to ‘sacrifice so much to art,’ . . . he retorted confidently that what had to be achieved was no less than the ‘strengthening of the protective moral armor of the nation.’”³ Thus did references to the History of Western Humanities — as constructed according to a fairly longstanding “Germanic” point of view — have an formative function in the Nazi program. Through them, the Volk would, as Michaud wrote, “fabricate its own ideal image . . . that would constitute the model and guide capable of propelling it toward its own salvation. Neither

¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35-36.

²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35.

³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 35-36.

the state, said Hitler, nor propaganda, said Goebbels, were goals: they were . . . means [to a broader end]. Nor was art ever a goal in itself. The ultimate goal was not [even] the production of the Reich as a work of art, but the formation of a people comprised of new men.”⁴ Cultural history, then — perceived in these politicized terms — was a literal remedy for the symptoms of German decline that Nazis feared. Having set forth these ideas, along with many others, Michaud’s book was generally well received. But it was criticized somewhat for a lack of grounding in primary source research.⁵ While I found his examples to be fresh and well-chosen, I will not quibble with these assessments. Instead, I would like to take this opportunity to compare some of his basic points with the detailed information my book has revealed about Nazi cultural politics as manifested in the arts coverage of the main Nazi newspaper, the *Völkischer Beobachter*. Thus, this presentation constitutes a brief synthesis of his analysis and some of the material that appears in my book. Let me provide a quick overview of *Inhumanities*. My new book analyzes how the primary propaganda outlet of the Nazi party presented the History of Western Culture according to themes of the National Socialist “world view.” Based on analysis of every major article the *Völkischer Beobachter* published about art, literature, and music, this research demonstrates how Nazi Germany attempted to appropriate not only the “Other Germany” of “Poets and Thinkers,” but the History of Western Humanities as a whole. Nazi leaders viewed their movement as the culmination of “Western Civilization,” or *Kultur*, and my book leads readers through their cultural self-justification.

As this “blurb” indicates, moving from my early work on music reception, I have traced in *Inhumanities* Nazi interpretations of other genres as well. But for the purposes of this paper, I will again concentrate on examples drawn from the newspaper’s invocations of the “serious” music tradition, particularly its references to Richard Wagner. This focus on Nazi *Musikpolitik* remains fully legitimate, because music reception was absolutely central to the History of *Kultur* as promulgated in the Nazi newspaper. [Statistics in footnote.]⁶ In the cultural coverage of the newspaper, it is statistically as well as conceptually clear that the German music tradition was the cultural legacy that the Nazi

⁴Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 140.

⁵For instance, James van Dyke wrote in the *Journal of Modern History* that “this is an intriguing book that will undoubtedly fascinate many who are interested in theories about images and their potential power. But readers who want historical accounts of the roles of art and artists in the legitimation and implementation of National Socialist policies . . . have to look elsewhere” [James van Dyke, “Review of *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*,” *Journal of Modern History* 78, no. 2 (2006): 526]. Similarly, Benjamin Martin wrote for *H-Soz-u-Kult* that “Michaud’s contribution to this project is likely not to satisfy many historians . . . For instance, his effort to contextualize Nazi ideas, while erudite and stimulating, remains somewhat impressionistic” [Benjamin G. Martin, “Sammelrez: Art in Nazi Germany,” *H-Soz-u-Kult* (August, 2006)].

⁶I will let a some statistics from my findings stand as verification of the centrality of music reception in Nazi culture. First, of the 1600 articles I gathered and studied, more than 1000 were dedicated to the subject of music and its composers. Secondly: overall, an average of 40 articles per year were devoted to “classical” music issues, while only an average of about 14 each year dealt with the “masters” of the other arts altogether.

cultural operatives most wanted to claim as “theirs.” Throughout the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, music was unquestionably deemed, as Pamela Potter — along with others — has demonstrated, “The Most German of Arts” — and, moreover, that Richard Wagner in particular was identified as the “Most German of All Germans.” All this said, let me now outline a few of Michaud’s more specific points about Nazi culture before then turning to an assessment of how material from the *Völkischer Beobachter* coverage of composers, spotlighting Wagner, validates his positions. As we have already seen, a primary point that Michaud made was that Nazi cultural politicians strove to increase German self-confidence by constructing an idealized self-image based on the supposed German place in Western cultural traditions. Or, in his words, “to make the genius of the race visible to that race [and thereby] restore its faith in itself by making it conscious of its historic mission.”⁷ A second major concept Michaud posited was that of the “Führer as Artist.” Michaud identified Hitler’s public persona as a culmination of the Romantic exaltation of the artist as spiritual leader. In his words: “Hitler presented himself not only as a ‘man of the people’ and a soldier with frontline experience, but also and above all as a man whose artistic experience constituted the best guarantee of his ability to mediate the Volk Spirit and turn it in to the ‘perfect Third Reich.’”⁸ Clearly also, Michaud contended, the construction of the Ideal simultaneously constituted the construction of the Other, with all that this opposition implied. Again, in his words: “the appearance of Hitler always entailed, as its corollary, the progressive disappearance of all enemies who were rejected by the Volk Community.”⁹ Returning to the supposedly positive implications of these cultural-political constructs, Michaud then contended that Nazi insistence that followers revere past creative leaders was much more about the present and future of the German-becoming-Nazi nation, than the past. As Michaud wrote, “The task of each work of art [or interpretation thereof] was not [just] to represent, but . . . to prepare for the realization of the ideal Reich.”¹⁰ Finally, as the last chapter of my book traces, the culmination of “Nazi culture” was — with catastrophic consequences — the Second World War itself. Michaud too identified the ultimately military implications of the Nazi mobilization of culture for party and national purposes: “When it became a matter of ‘defending the . . . community,’ Goebbels conflated “the struggle of the soldier, that of the worker, and that of ‘the creator of culture.’” Art, he pontificated, “is not a distraction for times of peace; rather, it too is a spiritual and trenchant weapon for war.”¹¹ Again, I do not feel that Michaud presented these points without sufficient evidence. However, it will be a useful exercise to assess these points with reference to some of the materials that I have just presented in *Inhumanities*. Today, for obvious reasons, I have elected to concentrate on material — along with a few comparative examples — from *Völkischer Beobachter* reception of Richard Wagner, as representative of these

⁷Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 74.

⁸Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 29.

⁹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 41.

¹⁰Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 98.

¹¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 197.

concepts as a whole.

Regarding the first of these themes, and indeed Michaud's pivotal point — that Nazi cultural politics intended to increase German self-confidence via interpretations of the German place in Western cultural tradition — it is clear that this truly was the message of virtually every *Völkischer Beobachter* article covered in my research. All of the paper's cultural-historical commemorations contributed to this effort to bolster faith in the creative Volk community. This was indeed their main function. And this is powerfully evident in the newspaper's relentless insistence on, and never-ending celebration of, the perceived notion that all the great composers of the Western music tradition were "German" — or alternatively, "Germanic," "Aryan," or "Nordic."

In its music reception, for instance, the *Völkischer Beobachter* worked intensively to appropriate Bach into "Germanic," and therefore National Socialist culture. In Bach's personality, the paper argued, were combined the "best hereditary powers of a healthy species" and therefore his art constituted a "culmination of racial development."¹²

For the editors of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, an immediate concern regarding the case of Mozart was to evaluate his "blood heritage."¹³ According to the paper, despite his wide travels Mozart "preserved the German inheritance of his birth — pure and unadulterated." Thus it was "a German" who raised Italian opera to its perfect, ideal state and then "brought it to his own people."¹⁴

Perhaps most intensively, the NSDAP injected race issues into its Beethoven reception.¹⁵ Indeed, dictates of racial anthropology nearly nullified the composer's value as a party hero. Portraits and observations of Beethoven by his contemporaries reveal that he had few of the physical characteristics associated

¹²"Bach-Abend des Kampfbundes für Deutsche Kultur," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 17 November 1933.

¹³Uwe Lars Nobbe, "Mozarts Bluterbe," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 October 1941. On Nazi interpretations of Mozart, see also Dennis, "Honor Your German Masters: The Use and Abuse of 'Classical' Composers in Nazi Propaganda" and Erik Levi, *Mozart and the Nazis: How the Third Reich Abused a Cultural Icon* (Yale University Press, 2010).

¹⁴Eduard A. Mayr, "Vom Genius der Musik: Rhythmus und Harmonie in Freiheit des Geistes," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 27 January 1931.

¹⁵For more on Beethoven reception, see Dennis, *Beethoven in German Politics*; and David B. Dennis, "Beethoven At Large: Reception in Literature, the Arts, Philosophy, and Politics" in Glenn Stanley, ed., *Cambridge Companion to Beethoven* (Cambridge University Press, May 2000) 292-305.

with Aryan stereotypes.¹⁶ Noticing this, a handful of pseudoscientists concluded that Beethoven was of impure blood.¹⁷ To counter notions that the composer might have been of mixed racial stock, the *Völkischer Beobachter* vouched for his purity in articles produced to cleanse Beethoven of supposed physical flaws. In the end, according to the paper, the forceful energy of his music proved the “world-wide validity of the spiritual work and the soulful nobility that the greatest sons of the German nation were capable of.”¹⁸

Surprisingly, efforts to ensure that a cultural figure was of certifiably pure German origins were even necessary in the case of Richard Wagner. Given that, as Joseph Goebbels put it, Wagner ranked in Nazi culture as the “most German of all Germans,” it was of particular importance that the *Völkischer Beobachter* put aside doubts about his heritage. So the newspaper took on this issue very directly. From time to time, the paper related, the “old swindle kept arising,” that “one of the greatest German geniuses of all, Richard Wagner, had Jewish blood in his veins.” These claims were based on rumors that Wagner’s mother had been the lover of Ludwig Geyer (whom she married after her first husband died) at the time when the composer was conceived. The *Völkischer Beobachter* strove to “overcome this filth and break through these lies once and for all” with a two-pronged argument: first by demonstrating that relations between Geyer and Wagner’s mother were innocent until they married — and that Richard was born before this happened; then by insisting that, in any case, Geyer was not Jewish. As the paper had it, it was absolutely certain, “according to the portraits that we have,” that Geyer had a “completely German head without the slightest indication of alien blood.”¹⁹ So, like the “whole house of lies built up by Jewish wiles,” this “mendacious construction would ultimately fall apart — to the shame and disgrace of Judah.”²⁰

Returning to Michaud: in his words, “a declared aim to turn German art into a promise of German happiness . . . became a rallying cry for all the nationalists of

¹⁶See Alessandra Comini, *The Changing Image of Beethoven: A Study in Mythmaking* (New York: Rizzoli, 1987) for detailed discussion of the iconography of Beethoven reception in the visual arts.

¹⁷Hans F. K. Günther, *Rasse und Stil* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1926), 30; Ludwig Ferdinand Clauß, *Rasse und Seele* (Munich: J. F. Lehmann, 1926), 60. See further discussion of these sources in Heribert Schröder, *Beethoven im Dritten Reich: Eine Materialsammlung* in Helmut Loos, ed., *Beethoven und die Nachwelt: Materialien zur Wirkungsgeschichte Beethovens* (Bonn: Beethovenhaus, 1986), 205.

¹⁸Hans Buchner, “Zum Beethoven-Jubiläum,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 9 December 1920.

¹⁹Josef Stolzinger, “Der alte Schwindel von Richard Wagners Blutbeimischung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 12 December 1929. For my own assessments of some of the mass of literature on the issues of Wagner and Nazism, see David B. Dennis, “Review Essay on Recent Literature about Music and German Politics,” *German Studies Review* (October 1997) 429-432; David B. Dennis, “Crying ‘Wolf’? A Review Essay on Recent Wagner Literature,” *German Studies Review* (February 2001) 145-158; and David B. Dennis, “The Most German of all German Operas: *Die Meistersinger* Through the Lens of the Third Reich” in Nicholas Vazsonyi, ed. *Wagner’s Meistersinger: Performance, History, Representation* (University of Rochester Press, 2003) 98-119.

²⁰F. v. Leoprechting, “Richard Wagner: Das Judentum in der Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 14 November 1920.

both the Second and the Third Reich. Hitler could not fail to win their support when he wrote ... in *Mein Kampf*: ‘How many people are aware of the infinite number of separate memories of the greatness of our natural Fatherland in all the fields of cultural and artistic life?’²¹ It is clear that *Völkischer Beobachter* coverage of the Western music tradition, including Richard Wagner, insisted that this was indeed the greatest field of *German* cultural prowess. Theme 2:

Michaud’s second major theme, the concept of the *Führer Artist*, ultimately leads to an even more immediate association between creators, especially Wagner, and Nazi leadership. As he put it, “the fact that the Führer ... was also called the artist of all artists ... placed him immediately at the heart of the Western tradition that assigned to art that most decisive of functions ...”²² In the case of music reception in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, the correlate to Michaud’s assertions about Hitler as *Führer-Artist* is the paper’s constant insistence that great creators, including writers, artists, and composers, were simultaneously political — each, in their own way, *Artist-Führer*. Indeed, my research shows that Nazi propagandists rigorously promoted the view that the primary creative impulse in most cases was as much political — especially patriotic and nationalistic — as artistic.²³

For example, even the liturgical music of Bach was less important to the *Völkischer Beobachter* as an expression of faith than as a national symbol. People had often referred to Bach’s work as “the musical incarnation of Protestantism,” the paper argued, but it achieved much more outside the mere context of music, managing to represent the “musical component of the culture of Friederich II’s Prussian state.”²⁴

Mozart too, according to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, was strongly driven by nationalistic impulse. Mozart’s “patriotic mission” it insisted, was to “replace Italian fashion with a “genuinely German” opera tradition.”²⁵

²¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 29.

²²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 175.

²³Once again, this emphasis on art for state’s or party’s sake had earlier roots in German cultural discourse: “The artistic and the political had fused German nationalism. Having defined itself as truly-creative; the artistic became political. Artistic creativity for the German nationalist movement was not merely an expression of man’s inner nature, but helped also to give form to the shapeless mass through symbols and public festivals. ... Politics and life must penetrate each other, and this means that all forms of life become politicized. Literature, art, architecture, and even our environment are seen as symbolic of political attitudes” (Mosse, *Nationalization of the Masses*, 15, 215). More recently, Huener and Nicosia have written that “Hitler and his followers came to understand German Culture and the role of the arts primarily in political terms. Specifically, they believed that it was the responsibility of the party and the state to rescue” (Huener and Nicosia, *The Arts in Nazi Germany*, 2).

²⁴Buchner, “Joh. Sebastian Bach.”

²⁵Grunsky, “Mozart der Deutsche: Zu seinem 150. Todestag.”

Some selective political biography was necessary in the case of Beethoven, for the composer's inconsistent politics remained problematic for the Party. Though he could, with some reservations, be counted as a member of the German race, Beethoven had exhibited some enthusiasm about the French Revolution and the rise of Napoleon. The paper therefore countered that although Beethoven had been exposed to French revolutionary ideals, he was "always a Rhinelander at heart."²⁶

But of all the creators that the *Völkischer Beobachter* extolled as politically motivated, Richard Wagner was its ideal. Given the composer's engagement with nineteenth-century German political culture, this was not a stretch. Still, it is remarkable how intensively the *Völkischer Beobachter* emphasized Wagner's political writings — as much or even more so than they concentrated on his musical productivity. As the paper put it, the writings were "essential, not marginal" to understanding the composer: "as an . . . extension of his artistic works, they testified [to the] sureness of his political perception and political will."²⁷ Of course, what *Völkischer Beobachter* writers found most resonant with the National Socialist outlook were the volkish components of Wagner's politics. In their view, the composer was the "pathfinder of the German resurrection," since he "directed the Volk back to the roots of its nature found in Germanic mythology."²⁸ Under the title, "Richard Wagner's Battle for the Volkish Ideal," the paper held that the composer felt himself "ever strengthened by his German-Germanic thoughts, and constantly sought to realize this spirit." Besides Treitschke, de Lagarde, and Wolzogen, who were "more comprehensively volkish" than most, it was Wagner who "fought hardest for the volkish idea with pen and word." Nazis admired the "prophetic foresight" of Wagner who "saw through the true spirit of the revolutionaries of 1848-49 with bitter disappointment" and, anticipating future developments, "turned away from liberal efforts without hope." Therefore, all of his writings were the "worthiest weapons for the final battle that approached."²⁹ His ideas were so similar to those of National Socialism, said the paper, that "in the speeches of young Germany" — that is, Hitler's above all — it "seemed like one was hearing Richard Wagner speaking to the Volk." This was a sign that in the "Third Reich of Richard Wagner," the "Führer principle of genius would prevail more than ever."³⁰

Thus did the music-historical material that appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter* resound with the Führer-Artist/Artist-Führer theme that Michaud identified throughout Nazi cultural politics: at a time "when the world came to be deserted by the certainty of salvation,"³¹ Nazi *Kulturpolitik* would "render visible the protector god who would make it possible for the body of the German race to

²⁶Ludwig Schiedermaier, "Beethoven und die Politik," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

²⁷Erich Valentin, "Richard Wagner und seine Zeit," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 31 March 1937.

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²⁹Wagner, *Judaism in Music*.

³⁰Walter Lange, "Bayreuth - ein sinnvoller Wahlspruch," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 16 June 1934.

³¹Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 179.

live eternally.”³² Hitler was the primary manifestation of this creative leader, but he came, according to this view, at the head of a long line of notable predecessors including the likes of Bach, Mozart, Beethoven, and especially Richard Wagner. Theme 3:

This leads to Michaud’s point about the simultaneous construction of the “opponent” in contrast to the Germanic ideal posited in Nazi culture. In his terms, “correlatively, Nazism deployed . . . violence . . . against all those who were likely to place in doubt that the lost object could be resurrected in the race and in art. . . . National Socialist terror was thus employed against all those who, in reality as well as in Nazi imaginary representations, opposed its [world view] . . .”³³ Ultimately, according to Michaud, it was this cultural thrust that led to the policies of extermination.³⁴ Thus did Michaud intensify the notion, which George Mosse originally postulated, that even anti-Semitism was predicated on cultural criticism. Art versions of these arguments toward eliminationist policies were not just added on subsequently as a tool to provide cultural historical justification for them. *Kultur* was the key and determinate factor in identifying the Other, based on Hitler’s clearly stated standards of judgment: do you make it, imitate it, or destroy it? According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, especially Heinrich Heine, but also the composers Meyerbeer, Mendelssohn, Mahler, and Schoenberg supposedly did the latter two things, so they and their “kind” had to be eradicated.

In treating this point as manifested in music-historical terms throughout the pages of the *Völkischer Beobachter*, it is necessary to address the place of Richard Wagner’s anti-Semitism in the paper’s rhetoric. From its earliest days, its cultural coverage emphasized Wagner’s treatment of the “Jewish issue.” As early as 1920, the paper presented extracts from Wagner’s *Judaism in Music*, which the paper subsequently relied upon more so than anything else the composer produced.³⁵ According to the paper, *Judaism in Music* was “more relevant than ever before, seeming as if it had been written yesterday, not a half-century ago” — the only difference being that in the meantime, “everything that Wagner prophesied had

³²Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany, [page #?]

³³Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany, 175.

³⁴“Whatever the physical criteria for their elimination may have been,” he wrote, “Jews, Gypsies, ‘degenerates,’ and homosexuals were shut away and exterminated for the same reasons as were the strictly political opponents of Nazism: because of what [they] might say that was . . . [unfamiliar and disturbing] to Nazism” (Michaud, The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany, 24-25).

³⁵For the full text, see Richard Wagner, *Judaism in Music and Other Essays*, William Ashton Ellis, ed. (Lincoln: Univ. of Nebraska Press, 1995).

become true...”³⁶ Above all, it added, Wagner found — like the Nazi leadership — “the main cause of the decline of humanity in the deterioration of the blood, in the ‘decay of race’ — i.e., in the mixing of noble races with lower ones.” It was because he sensed these things that Wagner was a “German prophet.”³⁷ Therefore, the *Völkischer Beobachter* continued, Wagner was for Nazis more than an “ingenious creator of phenomenal works of art”: he gave them “beautiful words for their difficult path out of the harsh present to a better and purer future.”³⁸ In his opinion, which the paper shared, “the only hope for liberation from the demon of decay was through the application of brutal force.”³⁹ Thus did the *Völkischer Beobachter* invoke Wagner’s writings as early as 1923 in order to raise decisive notions of eliminationist anti-Semitism.

Close investigation, moreover, reveals that while not every one of his operas was appropriated in anti-Semitic terms, (*Lohengrin* and *Die Meistersinger von Nürnberg* were often invoked in the paper, but as celebrations of Germanness, not attacks on Jews—however much Beckmesser may appear to be stereotyped) the smoking gun proving that Nazis brandished Wagner’s works in their anti-Jewish plot is found in *Völkischer Beobachter* reception of the *Ring of the Nibelungen*. Some of the strongest statements about anti-Semitic stereotypes in Wagner’s music dramas were contained in a 1923 article on “The World War in the *Ring of the Nibelungen*.”

Dramatically and musically, according to the paper, Wagner “anticipated the tragedies of the World War by depicting the fight for power symbolized in the ring.” In Alberich, Wagner embodied the “dark spirit of Jewish Mammonism, whose ghastliest form confronts us in the capitalism of the industrial age,”—the epitome of “loveless and coldhearted business interests.” It was in this form that “Mammonism came to rule the whole world,” the paper held, “clearly marked by the characteristics of the atrocious mixed-bloods whom the Master gave voice through Hagen.” The racial mixing implied here was of particular concern to the paper: “What caused the fall of the Roman empire? The racial mush brought about by its global politics.” And “Aryan-Germanic humanity” was “threatened with the same end—because the World War not only cost the German race more than three million of its strongest men,” but also “introduced many thousand colored soldiers into Europe, resulting in the infection and deterioration of the blood of European humanity to a shocking, unprecedented extent.” With “infallible certainty,” then, Wagner prefigured in Hagen the “dreadful catastrophe that [haunted] European humanity in general and the German Volk in particular.” Indeed, this was the background to “the heart-breaking tragedy” of the last offensive in 1918, as the *Götterdämmerung* exploded over [Wilhelm II and Germany].” Ultimately, the paper contended, “we must not overlook the fact that this battle for world control was a struggle over ... blood,” that is, race—

³⁶Hans Buchner, “Richard Wagner und das Judentum in der Musik,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 April 1922.

³⁷Seeliger, “Der deutsche Seher.”

³⁸“Der Dichter und Politiker.”

³⁹“Richard Wagner über ‘Das Judentum in der Musik.’”

“exactly as in the Tetrology.”

Moving beyond the war itself, the paper later insisted that one finds in the relationship between Siegfried and Mime a “reflection of our times.” The “ugly dwarf, an embodiment of the haggling Jew who wants to rise higher and higher like all the Eastern Jews crossing over the German borders, is Siegfried’s foster parent.” Significantly, though, he doesn’t raise the hero out of love: he does so only to arrange that Siegfried kill the dragon Fafner to capture the Ring and the hoard for him. When this is done, Mime “will cut off his head.” Here, in Stolzing’s opinion, Wagner signified the fact that “the Jew must exploit the powerful labor forces of the Nordic race to his own advantages.” But while Mime speculates thus, his “son” forges his own sword of victory with which he will slay the dragon, and since “the only one who can forge this sword of victory is he who knows no fear, Siegfried is the embodiment of National Socialism, which alone possesses the courage to break the chains of slavery around the German people.” Like Siegfried, National Socialism is “forging the army of liberation!” But the “parties of Alberich and Mime, Hunding and Hagen—that is, Jewry and Jew-bastard hangers on—are throwing themselves with everything they’ve got against the victory march of National Socialism.”⁴⁰ In this vain, the paper made further links between Wagner’s Ring cycle and Weimar era Germany via apocalyptic attacks on “modern operas” (*Zeitopern*), especially Ernst Krenek’s *Jonny spielt auf* of 1927). “Western civilization is going down while striking up Jonny [*sic*].” As an antidote, an affirmation of Wagner’s idealism was more urgent than ever, and that meant “making a clear distinction between a dark blue tones of the Walhalla motif and the cacophonous howling of the saxophone that would be more appropriate for accompanying lewd dances around the golden calf.” The “barbarization process that we are experiencing—the campaign that the impure has launched against culture under the mantle of a clinking and clanking pseudo-civilization—is all Alberich’s work.” “If you don’t take this seriously,” the paper warned, “you’re going to go down in the fall with them: now is the time to recognize and fight the enemy; fight with word and deed against the fate that is approaching.” According to this volkish millenarian view, “as this world falls apart” those who have renounced love for gold—the Alberichs, Mimes, and Hagens—will “disappear in the flood rolling in” and “only pure men and women, free of Alberich’s Curse, will be able to rebuild it.” So, fellow Germans must “purify themselves” and “band together in a new brotherhood of the Grail.” This, the paper preached, “is what Wagner tells us” in his Ring Cycle.⁴¹

Within the *Völkischer Beobachter*, editors and contributors including significant German musicologists, historians, literary scholars, and composers advanced the

⁴⁰ Josef Stolzing, “Der Weltkrieg im Ring des Niebelungen,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 August 1923–8 August 1923.

⁴¹ “Richard Wagner und wir,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 August 1928.

notion of Wagner as a prophet who communicated explicit anti-Semitic warnings in his writings. For the most part, they concentrated on his non-musical sources, especially *Judaism in Music*. However, as regards the music itself, it was in the Ring Tetralogy that National Socialist Wagnerians perceived the Meister's voice as harmonizing most perfectly with that of the Führer. These examples, as well as others drawn from non-musicians (no other major composer was so directly implicated as Wagner in Nazi anti-Semitic propaganda) confirm that *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural criticism formulated the image of the racial enemy through music-historical references, in keeping with Michaud's assertions. Ultimately, however, these hideously negative quotes do return conceptually to what was fundamentally "positive" about National Socialist *Kulturpolitik*, that is, (again Michaud) "leading every [German] individual back to the natural reflex of love for his or her own racial type" and directing them toward a redemptive future.⁴²

Theme 4:

Above all, Michaud postulated that National Socialist invocations of past creative leaders were intended as symbolic indications of what the New Germany would become, not just validations of present Nazi policies and ideas with references to the past. As he put it, "the awakening into the myth was . . . generally conceived as an awakening to the present — . . . a recapitulation of the past directed toward the future. As Baldur von Schirach declared, 'The perfect artists Michelangelo and Rembrandt, and Beethoven and Goethe, do not represent an appeal to return to the past, but show us the future that is ours and to which we belong.'"⁴³ This last line says it very succinctly: the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section was clearly designed for the same reasons. Throughout the paper's music coverage, we can find examples of direct associations of composers and their works with the Nazi party and its plans for the future.

The *Völkischer Beobachter* insisted, for instance, that Bach's music had renewed relevance in the context of twentieth-century German political development. As a symbol of Prussia "struggling and conquering in the spirit of Luther, as well as an emergent volkish Germany," Bach's art had "prophesied the fate of the Fatherland in its present, most severe volkish struggle." By performing such works, present-day musicians could provide the energy necessary to "reconstruct the nation in the spirit of Bach and his time."⁴⁴

Nazi cultural operatives likewise considered Mozart's music a powerful tool for the party and state on the rise. Writers for the paper insisted that it constituted a "political symbol and source of hope": just as in the acts of a great politician or military leader, "expression of volkish fate" in the works of Mozart was what

⁴²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 156-157

⁴³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 101. 106.

⁴⁴Hans Buchner, "Musikrundschau," *Völkischer Beobachter*, 19 October 1923.

made them “invaluable to Nazis and their time.”⁴⁵

Party interpretations of Beethoven also revealed an effort to associate the composer and his music with the very identity of the Nazi movement itself. Alfred Rosenberg reminded all Germans that “Whoever had a notion of what sort of nature operated in their movement knew that an impulse similar to that which Beethoven embodied in the highest degree lived in all of them”: the “desire to storm over the ruins of a crumbling world, the hope for the will to reshape the world, the strong sense of joy that comes from overcoming passionate sorrow.” When Nazis triumphed in Germany and throughout Europe, Rosenberg implied, they would recognize that Beethoven had passed on to them the ability and the will of German creation.”⁴⁶

But the most famous and often repeated version of this point in *Völkischer Beobachter* music reception was reference to the *Wach auf!* chorus of Wagner’s *Mastersinger*. Michaud argues specifically that “this injunction to Germany, which urged it to awaken, was thus primarily an [call] to remember its past and to construct its future on the ideal model of that past.”⁴⁷ Most conveniently for the Nazis, then, the 50th anniversary of Wagner’s death coincided with their accession to power in 1933. In that year, the Party promoted direct associations between Wagner with the new regime in many ways. Ceremonies for the Day of Potsdam in May, for example, peaked in a performance of *Die Meistersinger* at Berlin’s Staatsoper. Having attended a torchlight parade along Unter den Linden, Hitler and the rest of his government arrived for the third act of the opera.⁴⁸ The *Völkischer Beobachter* covered this event rhapsodically. Whoever witnessed how the Volk of Nürnberg “instinctively turned toward the Führer,” sitting in the royal seats, and then how the eternally beautiful *Wach auf* Chorus emerged from the choir “to touch each and every heart,” knew that “the moment of Germany’s transformation had arrived.” At the end, warm words of thanks rose from troubled hearts toward “the savior who sat above, following the opera with a unique light in his . . .”⁴⁹

Another important linkage of Wagner’s music with the development of Nazi cultural policy occurred at the September 1933 inaugural ceremony of the Reich Culture Chamber in the Berlin Philharmonic. Immediately after Goebbels’ inaugural speech, the *Wach auf* chorus sounded again. The *Völkischer Beobachter* described the moment as a “hopeful awakening” with, “as Dr. Goebbels so perfectly put it, ‘music for marching into the shining future of German culture.’”⁵⁰

But the event at which Hitler himself most publicly expressed his personal engagement with Wagner occurred during the second year of the Third Reich.

⁴⁵Buchner, “Zum Münchner Mozartfest.”

⁴⁶Alfred Rosenberg, “Beethoven,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927.

⁴⁷Alfred Rosenberg, “Beethoven,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 26 March 1927. Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 86.

⁴⁸“Der Festablauf am 21. März,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 March 1933.

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⁵⁰“Die Reichs-Kultur-Kammer eröffnet: Der Führer bei der Feier in der Berliner Philharmonie.”

On March 6, 1934, Hitler dedicated a monument to Wagner in Leipzig, sanctifying it as a “testament of solemn promises to live up to the wish and will of the master, to continue maintaining his everlasting works in ever-lively beauty, and to draw coming generations of our Volk into the miraculous world of this mighty tone poet.” Given that he was evidently invoking the poet and Meistersinger Hans Sachs on this occasion, it should come as no surprise that the foundation stone bore the words: “Honor your German Masters,”⁵¹ in reference not only to Wagner, but to the future of newly Nazified German culture as a whole.

While highlighting the Nazi obsession with Wagner’s *Meistersinger* exhortation, Michaud made it clear that this was indeed not a retrogressive feature in Nazi culture, but a forward looking call for future action. In his words, again opening with a citation from von Schirach, “As Baldur von Schirach said, ‘In Germany, there is nothing more alive than our dead.’ The immense effort of realization that was sweeping a whole people toward its ideal Third Reich was certainly quite the reverse of the work of mourning. It was the work of [reminiscence] that asserted itself as faith in one’s own power to reawaken the lost object”⁵² — that is, to “produce the New Man,”⁵³ very closely identified with the Wagnerian ideal as perceived by Hitler himself.

Ultimately, however, this process of national renewal involved going to war. From a popular perspective, given the horrible outcomes of Nazi geopolitical and military policy, it is natural to assume that the Second World War itself was the primary “goal” of the Nazi regime. But Michaud helps us to remember that the war itself was not the goal. It was a means to an end. And that end was, in his view, this realization of the New Man according to the image of Germany as the *Kulturation* formulated, in part, by the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section. As Michaud phrased it, warfare was identified with the “‘realization of the Idea,’ so that in the Nazi world view it had the same function as all its other ‘battles.’ Like the ‘battle for art,’ ‘the battle on the birth front,’ and the ‘battle for production,’ it was part and parcel of ‘the battle for life’ that was to lead to the realization of the essence of the German people. . . [O]ver and above all its tumults, the war was primarily intended to restore the calm and radiant vision of the eternal Reich that lay as a dream in the heart of the Volk spirit.”⁵⁴

There is no doubt that Nazi propagandists enlisted the whole of the Western cultural tradition, as perceived in National Socialist terms, to serve in the belligerent phase of their cause. Just when German armies invaded Poland,

⁵¹“Der Führer legt den Grundstein zum Nationaldenkmal Richard Wagners,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 March 1934.

⁵²Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 173.

⁵³Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 180.

⁵⁴Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 206-7.

Joseph Goebbels proclaimed that Nazis had “never reserved art for peacetime alone. . . .” To the contrary, “we have always held the position that it is precisely in such a moment” that the muses “need to deploy their powers.” Under Hitler’s leadership, the Nazis had placed this “spiritual weapon into the hand of our Volk” to wield as the “German nation was lining up to battle for its very existence.”⁵⁵

One of the best wartime opportunities for cultural politicians of the Third Reich to exploit Mozart, for example, came with the 150th anniversary of the composer’s death in 1941. The paper’s coverage made it clear that Mozart should be celebrated not only as a musician, but also as a reminder that Germany, “then fighting a battle for Europe, had to take up a leading and organizing role in the cultural world.” In the “great struggle for the preservation of Europe and for the preservation of European culture,” this day would “strengthen the resolve for battle, since Mozart reminded them of the values of life and culture for which they were fighting.”⁵⁶

Similarly, Beethoven appeared throughout *Völkischer Beobachter* propaganda as a “fighter of great willpower.”⁵⁷ For example, in April 1942, just after Hitler personally assumed direct command of forces in the East, Goebbels arranged a special celebration of “the leader’s” birthday. Its culmination was a performance of the Ninth Symphony and in his accompanying speech, featured in the *Völkischer Beobachter*, Goebbels dictated what he expected listeners to draw from the event: “When . . . [Beethoven’s] hymn resounds over all distant countries where German regiments stand guard, then we want everyone, whether man, woman, child, soldier, farmer, worker, or civil servant, to be equally aware of the seriousness of the hour and to experience the tremendous happiness of being able to witness and take part in this, the greatest historical epoch of our Volk.”⁵⁸

⁵⁵Joseph Goebbels, “Das Kulturleben im Kriege,” Rede zur Jahrestagung der Reichskulturkammer und der NS-Gemeinschaft “Kraft durch Freude” November 27, 1939, in Goebbels, *Die Zeit ohne Beispiel: Reden und Aufsätze aus den Jahren 1939/40/41* (Munich: Zentralverlag der NSDAP, Franz Eher Nachf., 1944) 219-223.

⁵⁶“Gauleiter Dr. Scheel bei den Salzburger Mozart-Feiern,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 7 December 1941.

⁵⁷Ludwig Schiederemair, “Beethoven und das ‘Schicksal’,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 21 October 1925.

⁵⁸“In Dankbarkeit und Treue: Ansprache von Reichsminister Dr. Goebbels in der Feierstunde der NSDAP am Vorabend des Geburtstages Adolf Hitlers,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 20 April 1942.

However, as it had done in service of so much of its cultural coverage, to exemplify the alignment between artistic creation and the Nazi war effort, the paper placed its strongest emphasis on Richard Wagner. Again, I will just present a minimum from the manifold examples of wartime Wagner reception that appeared in the *Völkischer Beobachter*. In the summer of 1941, just eight days after German forces invaded the Soviet Union, the paper made direct associations between his music dramas and the new front. According to the *Völkischer Beobachter*, his *Twilight of the Gods*, the last of the Ring Cycle, could be interpreted as presaging the positive outcome of the Barbarossa campaign: “the stormy tempo and powerful events of the conflict were bringing the German Volk closer than ever to recognition of the deepest meanings of the Ring — of the connections between great art and the Volkish war of liberation.” In the Ring Cycle, Wagner “shaped the inevitable historical progression of an old, rotten world toward self-immolation into a gigantic cultural symbol: the fall of the Walhalla gods wasn’t a catastrophe, but a great process of purification — relieving the world of enormous guilt.”⁵⁹

Still, the most extreme and infamous use of Wagner culture for the propagandistic aims of Nazi Germany at war was the series of wartime festivals at Bayreuth. Houston Stewart Chamberlain, the *Völkischer Beobachter* related, once said that the Festspielhaus in Bayreuth was “a battle sign — a standard — around which those who remained true would gather, armed for war,” and this “prophecy” was being realized at the wartime festivals.⁶⁰ Feature articles on the Green Hill as wartime bastion appeared in the paper throughout the conflict. In one, for example, placed on the front page directly beneath photos of fighting at the Eastern front, the *Völkischer Beobachter* published an extended statement about the significance of continuing cultural life, especially the Bayreuth Festival, as the war raged on. It was clear that only with the “dramatic progress of most recent German history under Adolf Hitler, and only with the war, that they had . . . once again developed a “sense for Siegfried, a sense for Wotan, a sense for Richard Wagner’s magical world — only then had they become real Germans.” When out of the “uncanny quiet of the great space,” in which you couldn’t even hear a pin drop, the “redeeming sounds rose up the pillars and the walls fell away in a sensation of dreaming, it seemed like Germans had been standing there for a thousand years as a race that — like Siegfried — knew no fear because they wielded *Nothung*, the sword they forged themselves on the anvil of world envy and the darkest enmity.” To provide soldiers and workers with this “unforgettable pleasure” was an achievement that could only have occurred in “Adolf Hitler’s Reich.” From this spectacle the Führer guests at the Festival “learned to know Greater Germany: the Germany that not only fought for its existence and its global validity with weapons, but which, as in earlier centuries and millennia, was called forth to spread its cultural heritage across borders and stand as a

⁵⁹Heinrich Stahl, “Die neue Götterdämmerung,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 1 July 1941.

⁶⁰Herzog, “Von Bayreuth nach Salzburg.”

model for other peoples.”⁶¹

Knowing of the utter devastation it wrought, we reject the National Socialist promotion of the war as leading to a future of German cultural advancement.⁶² Still, we must recognize that Nazi propaganda did not present the war as an end in itself, but as a means toward re-establishing Germany as *Kulturnation* — revived in the aesthetic forms suggested by the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section, among other propaganda sources.⁶³ In this endeavor, they failed. The final result was instead the reduction of their country to a state of ruin far more hideous than those Albert Speer had projected in plans for the structures he and his master imagined⁶⁴ — not after thousands of years, but after just twelve years of terror and six years of carnage. Ultimately, the culmination of “Nazi culture,” was the war itself — indeed, this was its hollow “masterpiece.” But Michaud’s arguments, combined with the evidence compiled from the *Völkischer Beobachter* cultural section—in particular its treatment of the Western music tradition and especially its invocations of Richard Wagner and his works—help us to understand better what impelled these destructive forces: the ironic realization is that, however distorted, they were originally conceived in “creative” terms.

⁶¹“Schau vom Festspielhügel,” *Völkischer Beobachter*, 23 July 1941.

⁶²In Saul Friedländer’s powerful words, “The important thing is the constant identification of Nazism and death; not real death in its everyday horror and tragic banality, but a ritualized, stylized, and aestheticized death, a death that wills itself the carrier of horror, decrepitude, and monstrosity, but which ultimately and definitely appears as a poisonous apotheosis.” Nazism, he continued, was a force that “ended in nothing, after having accumulated an extraordinary power, unleashed a war without parallel, committed crimes heretofore beyond imagination—a force that hacked the world to pieces in order to founder in nothingness” (Friedländer, *Reflections of Nazism*, 43, 58).

⁶³“War was not an end in itself; for National Socialism, war remained, in the same way as propaganda, art, and politics, ‘a means to an end.’ Warfare was far more directly identified with the process that led to the ‘realization of the Idea,’ so that in the Nazi Weltanschauung it had the same function as all its other ‘battles.’ Like the ‘battle for art,’ ‘the battle on the birth front,’ and the ‘battle for production,’ it was part and parcel of ‘the battle for life’ that was to lead to the realization of the essence of the German people” (Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 206-7).

⁶⁴Michaud reproduces Speer’s explanation of the “theory of ruin value” as follows: “By using special materials and by applying certain principles of statics, we should be able to build structures that even in a state of decay, after hundreds or (such were our reckonings) thousands of years, would more or less resemble Roman models. To illustrate my ideas I had a romantic drawing prepared. It showed what the reviewing stand on the Zeppelin Field would look like after generations of neglect, overgrown with ivy, its columns fallen, the walls crumbling here and there, but the outlines were still clearly recognizable.’ Delighted by the ‘luminous logic’ of this sketch, Hitler ordered that in the future the Reich’s most important buildings should be constructed according to the ‘law of ruins.’ Speer had hit the bull’s eye by responding ‘to the Führer’s desire’ in this way and, on his behalf, anticipating the moment when ‘men fell silent.’ That moment would come long after the movements of the community’s fighters had been frozen and immobilized in stone, and when history would at last recognize them as a people of artists and founders of culture who had constructed their own monument” (Michaud, *The Cult of Art in Nazi Germany*, 212).

